



Korean War Memorial.
Combat Visual Information
Center (Robert J. Thayer)

Remembering the Forgotten War

By HENRY H. SHELTON



In June 1950, some 135,000 North Korean troops attacked South Korea, sparking a bitter struggle that many have called the “Forgotten War.” While it may have been forgotten by some, it certainly was not by the soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and coastguardsmen who served in that remote theater. Today, more than fifty years later, we should reflect on the courage, sacrifice, and devotion of the men and women who served during the conflict. Indeed, I hope that every American is exposed to their story over the course of the ongoing commemoration. It is equally important that those of us in uniform today consider the hard lessons of Korea in developing the strategy and force structure to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

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Korean War: June 25, 1950–July 27, 1953



Source: Richard Holmes, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Military History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 483.

Reflecting on the three years of bitter fighting in Korea, I am reminded of two critical themes: first, ordinary Americans have the capacity to accomplish extraordinary things under unbelievable conditions; and second, thousands of brave citizens—both active and Reserve, draftees and volunteers—distinguished themselves in Korea, a distant land that few people in this country knew much about before the events of June 1950.

Indeed, in the best tradition of the Armed Forces, those who fought in Korea demonstrated great skill and commitment. They overcame the obstacles posed by a ruthless enemy, nature, an astounding lack of preparation, and a woeful state of readiness which was tolerated in the months and years leading to the war. In the end, they fought to a bloody draw; but by doing so, the U.S. military proved to the world that America is a reliable ally who puts its sons and daughters in harm's way for the cause of freedom.

From the fight by 24th Infantry Division to slow the enemy until reinforcements arrived, to the Inchon landing by 1st Marine Division and 7th Infantry Division, to the brave flyers and sailors who patrolled the skies over Korea and waters surrounding the peninsula, young Americans rallied to the cause of freedom and proved their courage and resourcefulness time and again.

The Cost of Freedom

We have all heard of Pork Chop Hill and Heartbreak Ridge, but the struggle encompassed much more than a few well-known engagements. It included thousands of firefights as troops from the United States and allied nations desperately fought their way across the jagged



Evacuation under Fire
by Hugh Cabot II.

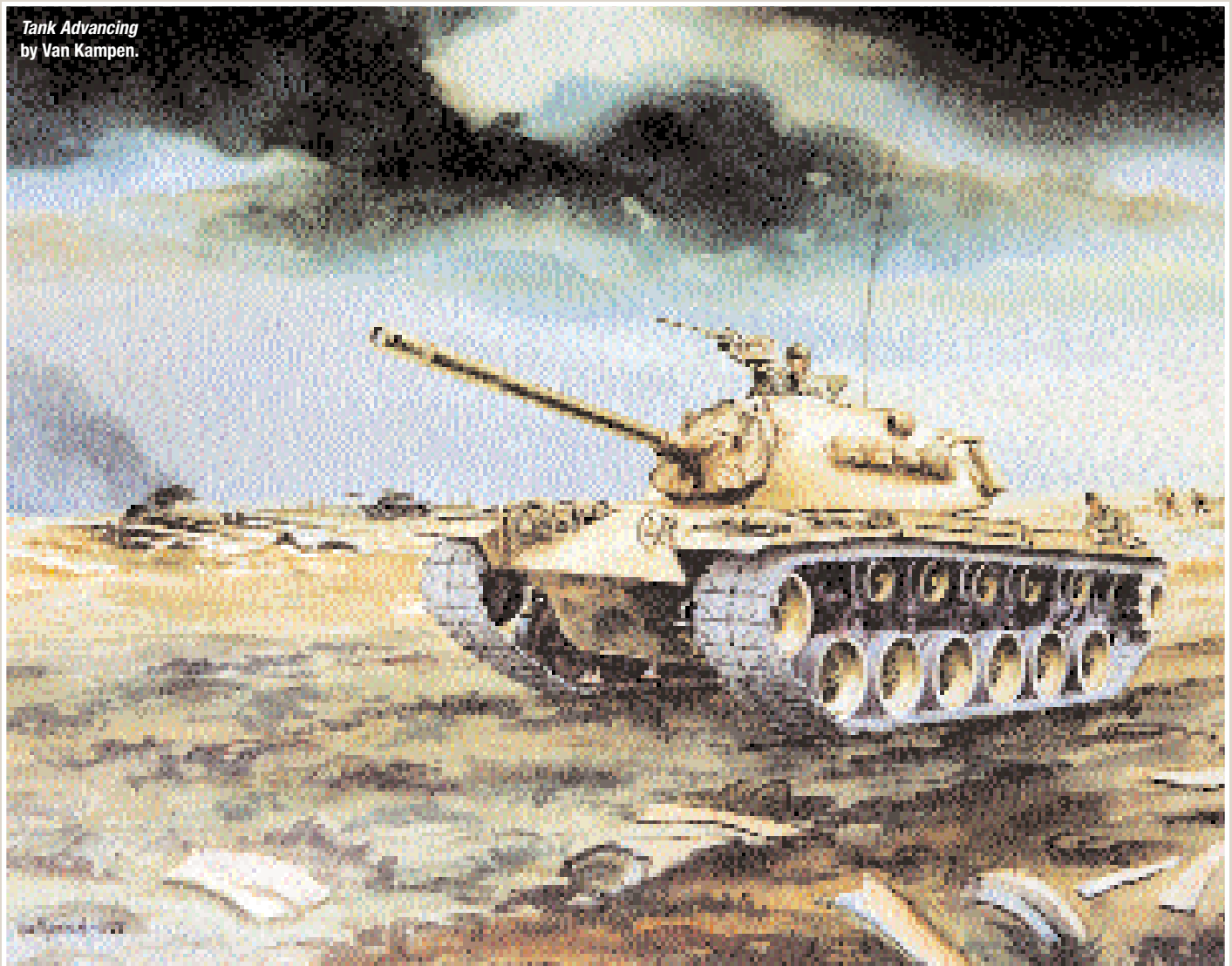
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the Armed Forces in Korea overcame a ruthless enemy, nature, and a woeful state of readiness



mountains, broad valleys, and terraced rice fields so common in a country known as the land of morning calm. It included thousands of aviators who flew into dense enemy fire while others faced perils at sea. It was a bitter contest against a determined, motivated, and well-equipped foe.

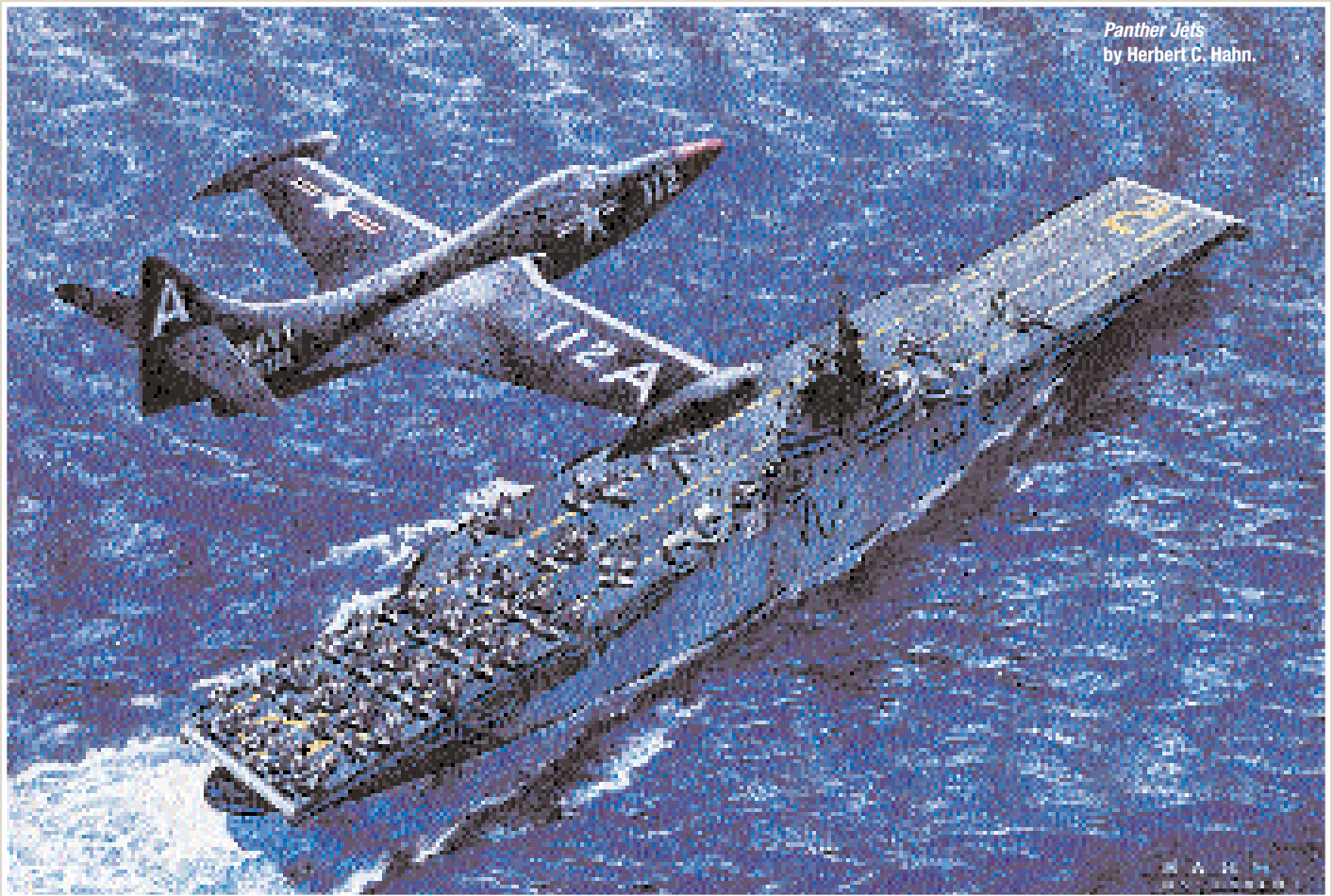
By the time the guns fell silent in 1953, nearly 37,000 Americans had made the ultimate sacrifice. One of them was a 25-year-old Marine lieutenant, Baldomero Lopez, who led his platoon over the seawall at Inchon on September 15, 1950. After climbing the wall, he attacked an enemy pillbox. Pulling the pin from a grenade



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as he prepared to throw—he was shot in the shoulder and chest. The grenade dropped to the ground. Realizing he had exposed his men to danger, Lopez crawled to the live grenade and pulled his body over it, absorbing the explosion and saving members of his platoon.

On that day Lieutenant Lopez became a casualty of the Korean conflict. For his action, the President posthumously bestowed on him the Medal of Honor. His display of courage in battle, self-sacrifice, and devotion to duty continues to inspire everyone in uniform to this day. Moreover, it is a vivid reminder of the price paid by America during the fight for South Korea's freedom.



Panther Jets
by Herbert C. Hahn.

U.S. Navy Art Collection

In fact the war is a testimony to the cost of freedom. It is a story about standing shoulder-to-shoulder with allies who share a common ideal. Most importantly, Korea reminds us that peace dividends—if not carefully calculated and prudently distributed—can break the bank when it comes to readiness. We must never again allow the euphoria surrounding the end of one war (either the hot or cold variety) to render us unprepared for the next. This lesson must not be forgotten.

Indeed, the experience of the Korean War also suggests that the strategy of deterrence in the early 1950s, built upon a capacity to mobilize and an ability to employ atomic weapons, needed to be reconsidered. In retrospect, the state of readiness of those American forces forward deployed was a major factor in the enemy decision to invade the South. The communists gambled that

they could conquer South Korea before the United States could mobilize. That gamble almost worked. If the Nation plans to depend on a strategy of deterrence to maintain peace in the future, its military capabilities and warfighting readiness must be preserved.

The Joint Team

Korea also reminds us of the powerful synergy and combat capability that are created when we fight as a team. For example, jointness was only given lip service in June 1951. That month, *USS New Jersey*, together with allied warships, provided naval gunfire support to U.N. forces on the ground along the east coast of Korea. Close air support for operations by Eighth Army was furnished by squadrons of 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, and 1st Marine Division fought bravely as part of X Corps. In addition, naval aircraft from fast carriers of Task Force 77 provided close air support and air interdiction in support of Eighth Army operations as aircraft from Fifth Air Force cleared MiGs from the skies and supported troops on the ground by raining 500-pound bombs on enemy positions both day and night, in good weather and bad.

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As this account illustrates, the services worked well together when required. They formed a joint team and focused on common goals and the pursuit of victory. But the jointness achieved in Korea was driven by operational imperatives and implemented on an ad hoc basis. In the wake of the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the Armed Forces are no longer cobbled together at the last minute in a crisis. Today, the services routinely come to the fight as part of a joint task force, ideally a joint team that has planned and trained to fight as a unified combat force. They are led by commanders who have been schooled in the art of joint warfighting and understand the unique and complementary capabilities which each member of the team can bring to the fight.

In the future, when we fight it will be as a joint team. We have developed a structure designed to be more capable and better prepared for joint operations. Indeed, with the establishment of U.S. Joint Forces Command,

we have a unified command that is focused on joint experimentation and training before the first shot is fired. Moreover, we continue to expand and refine joint doctrine while pursuing new concepts that will enable us to better fight together. Equipment is increasingly interoperable and joint forces are more capable.

A powerful monument to the veterans of the Korean War stands across the Potomac River from my office at the Pentagon. It depicts a

squad of men moving in the rain—watchful, ready, and determined. It memorializes those Americans who fought bravely alongside their allies to free South Koreans from the grip of communist invaders. It serves as a permanent reminder to the fact that freedom does not come easily or cheaply. On a personal level, it reminds me that when the military is called on to fight, it is individual soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines who put their lives on the line. In the event,

the Armed Forces continue to underwrite the peace, prosperity, and freedom all Americans enjoy.

Fifty years after the conflict, South Korea is a free and prosperous strategic ally that radiates hope and confidence, thanks to a generation of Americans who fought the first hot war of the Cold War. But while reflecting on the past, we should recall that maintaining peace and security falls on another generation today. They must be watchful, ready, and determined from Kansas to Kuwait, and from Kosovo to Korea.

JFQ



Refugee
by Robert Baer.

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